

GATES HISTORY—A Legacy of Law Enforcement Support

GATES, NY—The people of the Town of Gates have shown their support for public safety and for our Gates police officers in many ways, whether it was the community’s backing of their successful endeavor to establish the Gates Police Keystone Club, or the grassroots citizens’ volunteer effort to form the Gates Citizens Police Benevolent Association.

This year, which is the 55th anniversary of the founding of the Keystone Club, is a fitting opportunity to look back at the formative years of our police department and the establishment of these organizations. The work of both of these groups—police and citizens—set the stage for the dedicated and professional police department that today we often take for granted.

From the appointment of Harry Olmstead as the first Gates Constable on April 6, 1813, public safety was an important service of local government. When motorcycles began to appear on the roads, the Gates Town Board passed a Motorcycle Ordinance. On July 6, 1915, Gates Constable Henry Wilson posted copies of the ordinance throughout the town.

The year 1928 is specially remembered for public safety when the first “stop and go” lighted traffic signal was installed at the intersection of Buffalo Road and Howard Road at a cost of \$715. The three Gates Constables that year and their salaries were William Daggar, \$738.30; Franklin Dix, \$579.40; and George Weitzel, \$310.25.

Shortly after World War II, the citizens of Gates continued to respond and support public safety with the establishment of the Civil Defense Auxiliary Police Volunteers. By 1963, about 20 men had come forward to provide assistance to the town constables and county sheriff’s deputies in the event of a natural or enemy-caused disaster. That year, the organization was led by Civil Defense Administrator Col. Raymond L. Welch; Gates Supervisor Frank F. Kipers; and

Col. Robert N. Abbott, who was a Gates resident and then-director of civil defense for Monroe County.

When William Stauber was named the town's first full-time officers and Chief of Police in 1960, one of his first actions was to recommend that the Civil Defense volunteers be better organized and that Clarence Kelly be named captain of this group. The Town Board unanimously accepted Chief Stauber's recommendation.

Today, the Civil Defense volunteer group has evolved into the Town of Gates Special Police Unit.

In January 1961, the Town Board appointed five part-time constables to work with Chief Stauber: Roy Bettin, Julius Cavalier, Thomas Kwapick, Norbert L. Gerow and George Masonic. Chief Stauber's salary was set at \$4,800 for the year with an anticipated \$200 raise on July 1, 1961. Each constable was paid \$1,700 a year.

The 1961 Gates Police budget of \$28,750 included \$4,000 for the police car and auto expenses, \$2,500 for new equipment, and \$1,500 for the Civil Defense Auxiliary Police Volunteers.

Looking forward to future expansion, the police department received support from the Town Board to purchase a used motorcycle for \$400 in July 1961. In October 1961, Kent M. Lechner was appointed as the second full-time Gates police officer. Officer Lechner, of Hinchey Road, had earned the highest score from among 54 applicants who had taken the Civil Service test that year. His appointment was unanimous.

On June 17, 1969, our police officers met at Ackerman's—a former stagecoach stop and then a restaurant and hot dog stand at the corner of Lyell Avenue and Howard Road—to form the Gates Police Keystone Club, a union similar to the Rochester police officers' Locust Club.

Gates Police Officer Joseph Messura, whom the *Gates-Chili News* later described as the “guiding light in the creation of the Keystone Club, was elected president; James Keltz was elected vice president; and John Arend was elected secretary–treasurer.

The first public word of the founding of the Keystone Club came in the *Gates-Chili News* on July 10, 1969, when Supervisor Joseph W. Campbell said that the Town Board “is opened minded. I think it’s a good idea. Other towns have it; fire departments, too. . . . I don’t see why it (the Town Board) would not recognize the club.”

Shortly thereafter, the Gates Town Board voted to recognize the Keystone Club. At the time, police salaries started at about \$7,940 a year to a maximum of about \$9,000 a year after four years of service.

At its founding, our police officers recognized the need to establish closer ties with Gates young people. They decided to sponsor a youth dance on December 6, 1969, at the Gates Chili High School.

“This dance will serve for us to get better acquainted with the young people of Gates,” said then-Gates Police Officer William A. Gillette in an article in the *Gates-Chili News* at the time. More than 350 teens attended the dance. A second dance was held in 1970.

During the early years of the Keystone Club, those who succeeded Officer Messura as president included Carl Ducci, William Gillette, Florian Komorowski, James Marasco, Dennis Brydalski and David DiCaro, who served in this position during the club’s 20th anniversary.

As ways to “give back” to the townspeople in return for the residents’ support of the Keystone Club, the officers increased their community service. They sponsored a division of Gates Little League and two teams of Gates Girls Soccer, purchased equipment and donated funds to the Gates Volunteer Ambulance Service, participated in the Leukemia “Celebrity

Waiter” events, supported Camp Good Days and Special Times (as it was known then) and continue their support of the Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics to the present day.

On the morning of April 17, 1973, the community was shocked to learn of the untimely death of Police Chief William Stauber. He was stricken at his home by an apparent heart attack. Chief Stauber was 39. Gates Police Sgt. Gerald Thurley was named Acting Chief of Police and served until Thomas J. Roche was appointed Chief of Police on February 19, 1974.

With the sudden passing of Chief Stauber, a group of Gates citizens realized that more could be done to support our town’s public safety officers, and especially to financially assist them and their families with sickness, retirement and death benefits.

On April 16, 1973, citizens and business owners met the Sheraton Airport Inn on Brooks Avenue to form the Gates Citizens Police Benevolent Association to raise funds and provide these supplemental benefits to our officers. Nick DiPonzio, general manager of the Sheraton Airport Inn, was elected chairperson. Vice chairpersons were William R. Wilson, owner/operator of Bill’s Rotary Service Station; and Cleon Salvage, manager of Schuster Express Trucking. George Erdle, executive vice president of Erdle Perforating Company, was elected secretary; and Jack Wilson, a CPA with Davie, Schulman, Kaplan and Braverman, was elected treasurer. The advisors to the Benevolent Association were Officer William Gillette and Officer Carl Ducci, who were then the president and vice president of the Keystone Club, respectively.

To “get the word out” about the Benevolent Association, Officer Gillette and Mr. DiPonzio presented an honorary membership to entertainer Liza Minnelli who was in Rochester for a concert at the War Memorial in November 1973 and who was honored at a party at the

Sheraton Airport Inn on Brooks Avenue in Gates. Her honorary membership made the front page of the local newspaper which provided publicity about the new association.

The Benevolent Association's first fund-raising dinner/dance was called "an overwhelming success" when about 500 people attended at the Eagle's Club on Buffalo Road on September 2, 1973.

A memorial plaque was presented to Connie Stauber in memory of her husband Chief Stauber.

In less than a year, interest in the Benevolent Association had grown. Regular public information in the local newspaper kept our town residents informed.

"The Town of Gates provides life insurance, workmen's compensation and health benefits for the officers," the *Gates-Chili News* reported on February 6, 1974. "However, with the inherent dangers involved in the law enforcement profession, the chances of an officer sustaining injuries on the job have risen over the past years. The number of policemen (*sic*) killed while on duty across the country has alarmingly increased.

"With those thoughts in mind, the Citizens Benevolent Association was formed to give financial assistance to the officers above the basic town benefits, and to give appreciation to each of the men (*sic*) who risk their lives in service to the community," the *Gates-Chili News* continued.

Additional members of the Benevolent Association Executive Committee who joined in 1974 included Ronald Ardizzone, Robert Vandermallie, Edwin Wilcox, Robert Woodruff, Ronald Bellavia, Thomas Pearson and Robert Bosdyk.

The following year, four new members joined the Executive Committee: Craig Densmore, Donald Ioannone, Frank Ioannone and John Robortella.

As the governing boards of Gates and of communities throughout New York State and the nation realized the importance of supporting their public safety officers, the Executive Committee of the Benevolent Association determined that a separate citizens' association was no longer needed. By the early 1980s, the citizens' group was disbanded and remaining funds were donated to the Gates Police Department for the purchase of new and replacement equipment.

“The people of the Town of Gates have always supported the men and women who serve in law enforcement,” said retired Gates Police Officer (and now Town Historian) William A. Gillette, who has the more-than-half-century depth of institutional knowledge to have been directly involved and present at the formation of both the Keystone Club and the Citizens Benevolent Association. “From the days of Constable Olmstead in 1813 to 2024, we thank the men and women who have stepped forward and place their lives on the line every day for our protection.”

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