



Westmount's Police Department /1

Description

The saga of Westmount's police and fire departments from 1876 to 1928

By Michael Walsh

September 21, 2021

"The Fire Department of this Town shall be comprised of the Chief of Police of the Town, and of the different members of the Police Force of the Town, and the Chief of Police shall be known as the Chief Engineer and other members of the Police force as firemen. And said force shall be called the Town Fire Police..."

– By-Law 54, Town of Westmount, March 18, 1895

One of my fondest childhood memories is living in a small mining town in British Columbia close to the Alberta border. The town had one policeman known as Constable George. He drove through the streets in a motorcycle with a sidecar – presumably to transport offenders to his goal. He always carried a long pole, similar to today's selfie-stick, with a large piece of white chalk attached at one end. He would use this apparatus to mark the tires of cars to calculate parking time limits along the various residential streets.

The one thing that was striking about Constable George was the close relationship he had with the town's residents. Driving along his route, residents would wave and always be greeted by their first names. On more than one occasion, I was scolded by him with the warning "Michael, if I catch you doing this again, I will speak to your mother!"

By 1875, Council realized that the growing crime rate and number of municipal infractions necessitated the need for a municipal police force.

This, of course, was in direct contrast to the RCMP officers that had provincial jurisdiction. Their polished cruisers with rolled up windows would, occasionally, drive through town, driven by faceless officers. Perhaps they were concerned that developing any sort of relationship with the community would somehow undermine

their authority.

The Village of **Notre Dame de Grace** (today's City of Westmount) also had a sole policeman named **John Kennedy Kerr**. From all accounts, he was the direct opposite of Constable George from my childhood. As we will see, he was untrained, impulsive, unscrupulous and somewhat arrogant. For some reason, Council bowed to his bullying tactics and promoted him to Chief of Police. His performance in that role was a disaster, resulting in his arrest and the dismissal of the Town's entire police force.

Before we get ahead of our story, let us step back in time and become acquainted with the origins of policing in Westmount.



The bucolic village of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce depicted in a painting of Greene Avenue by J. Duncan – Image: courtesy of City of Westmount

In its beginning, the Village of Notre Dame de Grace has been described a bucolic area comprised of vast farmlands traversed with streams and deep ravines dotted with acres of bountiful orchards. Its proximity to neighbouring Montreal made it a prime attraction for those wishing to escape the challenges associated with residing in a growing metropolis.

Some contributed to their new residential area by investing their wealth in the construction of large estates; a minority, however, viewed this growing village as an opportunity for crime.

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“... that in consideration of the police being required immediately, the committee be empowered to engage suitable parties to act as police...”

– Council Minutes, Village of Notre Dame de Grace, July 5, 1875



There was one detail: crimes were localized in specific areas of the Village. Council had the powers to create and maintain a police force at the cost of the municipality; however, if their duties are confined to a particular area, it would require an approval of a majority of rate-payers in that region.

Moving forward on this proposal, Council enacted **By-Law 9** in 1876 that established a police force confined to the municipality's eastern portion. This was funded by a largely unpopular municipal "**Police Tax**". To start, the new force would consist of one policeman whose accommodation was arranged through the Trustees of the Dissident School. In 1887, Council hired **P. C. Enright**, a municipal policeman whose duties were confined to the winter season provided he resides within the municipality.

'... he [John Kennedy Kerr] was untrained, impulsive, unscrupulous and somewhat arrogant. For some reason, Council bowed to his bullying tactics and promoted him to Chief of Police.'

One year later, Council hired **Policeman Loyd** as the second member of the force. His contract was for a period of three months; after which he resigned. He was replaced by John Kennedy Kerr in August 1877 at a salary of \$7.00 per week.

By November 1880, the municipality's police force was reduced to a sole policeman, John Kerr, following the death of P.C. Enright due to an illness. At that point, Council decided a uniform was in order and, in 1881, Constable Kerr was provided one at the Corporation's expense.

The police force added a second member, **P. C. Conroy**, in 1882. His performance was far from stellar – drawing concern amongst several council members. Added to this, was John Kerr's arrest for violent assault, the following year. For reasons that were never recorded, Council sided with Constable Kerr and paid his legal expenses that led to an acquittal.

At this point, Council started to define the duties of the municipal police force. They concluded that, while not keeping the peace, policemen should assist in other municipal services. As such, Constable Kerr's duties expanded to ploughing snow during the winter months.

By March 1884, Constable Kerr had an assistant policeman. His name was **Mr. Fortin**, a former lamplighter. The municipality hired him to attend the lamps, water the streets, work on the roads and sidewalk and act as a policeman when required. Not surprising, he objected to this varied list duties and received no sympathy from council members. They reminded him "that he was to work 10 hours a day at whatever he was ordered to do" and that he was "employed at the pleasure of the Council".

'Added to this, was John Kerr's arrest for violent assault, the following year. For reasons that were never recorded, Council sided with Constable Kerr and paid his legal expenses that led to an acquittal.'

It appeared that Constables Kerr and Fortin were quite successful in apprehending individuals breaking the law. There was, however, an unforeseen problem – where should they be held? The City of Montreal refused to accept Westmount's prisoners at their station on St. Catherine Street. In 1884, the **Town of Saint Henry** agreed to provide temporary accommodation for prisoners at fifty cents a head. In addition, Saint Henry's Chief of Police provided services for both municipalities.



Mr. Fortin's policing tenure came to an end, two years later, when he was dismissed for unsatisfactory performance as a lamplighter. The same year, **George Lee** was hired as the municipal lamplighter and assistant to Constable Kerr. Clearly, policing the entire municipality couldn't be performed by two individuals – as such Council hired **Robert Bennie** to bolster the force. In addition, a Police Committee was formed to oversee the operational duties of the force.

Their first report, in February 1888, gave Constable Kerr an unsatisfactory rating for his performance in his municipal duties. (Aside from his police duties he was also responsible for snow ploughing and providing oil for a streetlamp at the corner of Greene Avenue and St. Antoine Street). Kerr took affront to the criticisms and promptly resigned – a turn of events that Council didn't foresee. As a “parting gesture” he was awarded \$100 in severance pay and a glowing letter of reference.

This turn of events left the Town with two constables: Robert Bennie (a new hire) and George Lee. Surprisingly, they were not supplied with uniforms, nor were they accountable to the Police Committee for the nature of their arrests. Two years later, to create a formal reporting structure, Council defined the duties of the police that included the reporting of all arrests and other matters coming under their notice.

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The Town's force, still without a Chief of Police, rehired John Kerr, in September 1890, to that position at salary of \$11 per week and uniform. One month later, Constables Bennie and Lee resigned – hardly an auspicious beginning for the Town's new **Chief of Police**.

The Town's Mayor filled these vacancies with **John Musgrove** and **John Robertson** at a salary of \$10 per week. In addition, Council adopted a formal series of police regulations causing the resignation of both newly hired policemen and another Constable named **W. Ralph**.

These events foreshadowed a larger issue concerning the police force, specifically Council's dismissal of the entire constabulary and the forced resignation and arrest of John Kerr.

“Gentlemen, The Police Committee beg to submit the following report.”

“Since the last meeting of Council it has been found necessary to make a thorough investigation as to the condition of the Police Force of this Town... The evidence was taken under oath, and disclosed we regret to say a lamentable state of affairs; and after the conclusion of the evidence the Police Committee unanimously resolved that it would be impossible to continue to trust the protection of the Town to the late members of the Police Force, who were called upon to resign and all did with the exception of Chief Kerr who was dismissed.”

“The evidence... was of such a serious character that it not only justified them in discharging the members of the Force but compelled them in the interests of the Town to do so forthwith.”

“Your committee would also report that Chief Kerr has been arrested at the instance of Mr. Ralph, in connection with one of the charges made, and in the opinion of your committee, proved against Constable Kerr.”

– Council Proceedings 1892

In retaliation, John Kerr sued the Town of Cote St. Antoine, in 1893, losing in a judgement passed by the **Superior Court of Montreal**. The judgement also included costs, which the Town taxed at \$233.20. Failing to



pay the monies owed, the Town placed a lien of Kerr's properties – 94 acres in the Township of Ascot. By 1894, the Town decided to suspend all actions to recover the costs and discharged all hypothecs against Kerr's immovable properties.

With his professional life in tatters, John Kerr relocated to Sherbrooke where he sustained an accident that left him seriously injured for the remainder of his life.

'... the Town placed a lien of Kerr's properties... By 1894, the Town decided to suspend all actions to recover the costs and discharged all hypothecs against Kerr's immovable properties.'

At this point, the Town needed to rebuild its police force. Council hired **James Harrison**, a former Grand Trunk Constable, as Chief of Police, and two additional policemen:

"Your committee, after careful investigation has appointed Mr. James Harrison, as Chief of Police, at a salary of fifteen dollars per week, and Harkness and Racey as policemen at a salary of ten dollars per week. The engagement of the Chief is subject to termination at any time by giving thirty days notices, while that of the Policemen requires one week's notice."

– Council Minutes, June 6, 1892

This period of uncertainty did not go unnoticed by people with criminal intent. The number of burglaries in the town increased, forcing the hiring of additional constables and the posting of cash rewards.

One year later, Westmount established their first Court and appointed **Mr. Mahon** as the first magistrate. By 1885, a **Court clerk** was hired and a **Juror List** compiled.

Now that the newly re-established Police Department seemed to be operating smoothly – Council turned their attention to the construction of a **Fire and Police Station**. In terms of its location, the members had three options under consideration. The first was on Olivier Avenue, where they purchased two lots from **Dr. Elder** and **Mr. J. Smith**, and contracted **Alexander Cowper Hutchinson** for the building's design. The second option was a location on Clarke Avenue; the third was on Greene Avenue where the **McCall Brothers** had a local business.

'... Council viewed Stanton Street as an area where, over time, additional building would occur for municipal services, specifically in November 1895, when Walter Wardle was prevented from building houses on Stanton Street.'

In the end, by August 1894, Council decided to purchase 37,900 square feet from the School Commissioners on Stanton Street, referred to as the "**School House**" at a cost of \$16,500. A few months later, Council moved their offices to the former schoolhouse renaming the building "**Town Hall**".

Interestingly, Council viewed Stanton Street as an area where, over time, additional building would occur for municipal services, specifically in November 1895, when **Walter Wardle** was prevented from building houses on Stanton Street. The Town expropriated the lot and sub-division where the proposed buildings were to be erected. In October 1898, the Town settled with the estate of the late Walter Wardle that involved an absolute cession of all property adjoining Stanton Street as well as a private road named **Thornhill Avenue**.

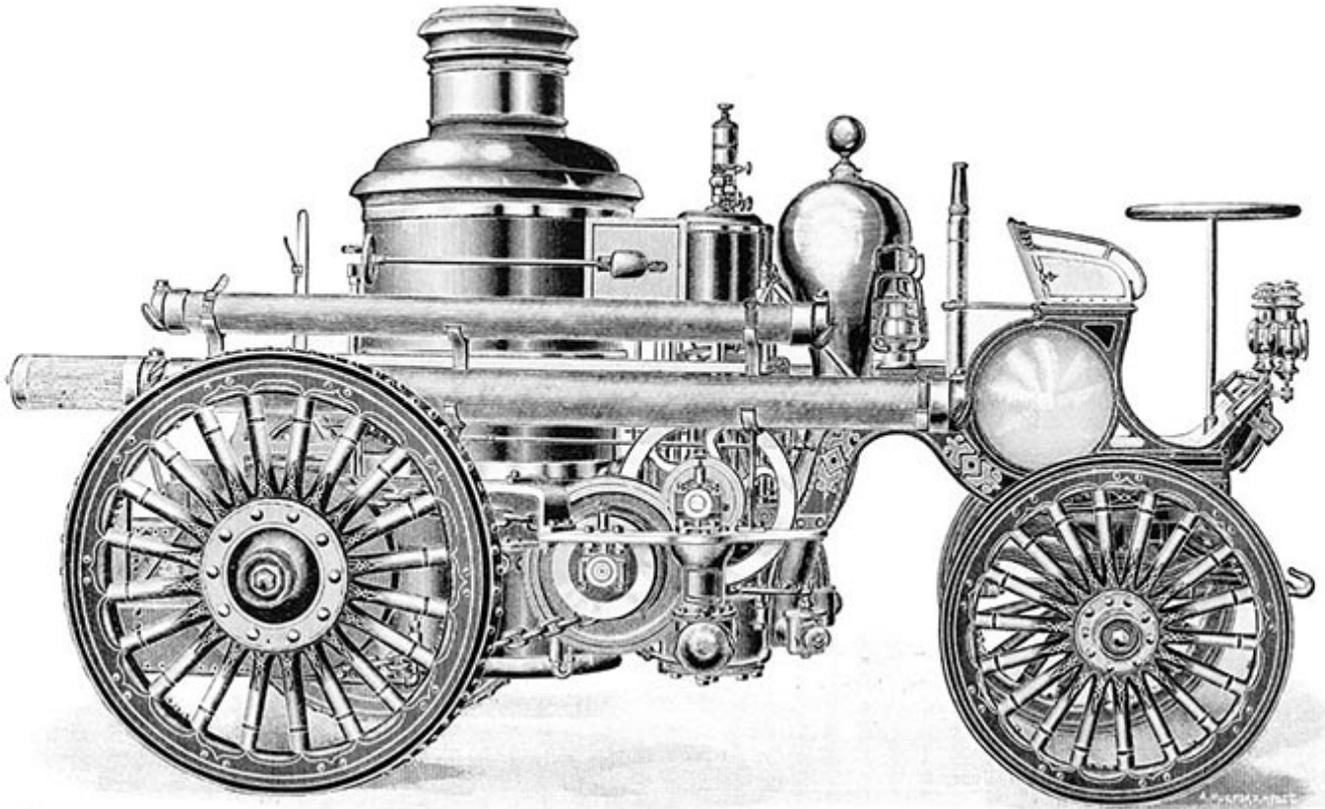
A formal reorganization of the Fire Department occurred in 1895 with the adoption of **By-Law 54**:

"The fire department of this Town shall be under the direction of the Fire Committee of the Council."

"The Fire Department of this Town shall be comprised of the Chief of Police of the Town, and of the different members of the Police Force of the Town, and the Chief of Police shall be known as the Chief Engineer and

other members of the Police force as firemen. And said force shall be called the Town Fire Police..."

– By-Law 54, Town of Westmount, March 18, 1895



Stream fire engine similar to one used by the fire department in the late 1800s – Image: [Unknown author](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

It appears that **bicycles** played a role in funding the Police Department. They were used for urgent calls, however, residents owning these were imposed a bicycle tax with funds going directly into the department's operation budget.



The breast star of a Knight of Grace of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem – Image: [Dave Boven](#), CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

In 1896, the Police Department formed a branch of the **St. John's Ambulance Association** to provide front-line emergency care.

As the Police Department's list of duties grew to include stray animals, gardens with decaying vegetables and the enforcement of an evening curfew for children, it became apparent additional personnel were required. The solution was a new position "**Special Constable**"; and, in 1898, the first members came from the scavenging force, park night watchmen and park caretakers who were also trained in the use of fire apparatus.

In 1898, **plainclothes policemen** joined the force for special duties and **By-Law 92** was adopted, providing job descriptions for the police department that outlined their duties in the enforcement of municipal by-laws. In addition, the department was placed under the jurisdiction of the **Police, Fire and Health Committee**. Strangely, this reorganization resulted in a reduction of the police force and the salaries moved to the **Health Department** for the upkeep of their horses. The remaining personnel were issued revolvers, holsters, and ammunition as part of their uniforms. In addition, Council provided Chief Harrison with a subsidized residence above the police station.

By 1903, **fire hydrants** were installed (rented from the **Montreal Water and Power Company**) and fire alarm boxes (provided by **Northern Electric Company**) were placed at strategic locations throughout the municipality.



Fire truck manufactured by the Waterous Engine Company. A similar model, pulled by a team of horses, was purchased by the fire department in 1901 – Image: [dave_7](#), [CC BY-SA 2.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

It did not take long for the City of Montreal (already in a dire financial situation) to take notice of the additional funds acquired by Westmount through the imposition of fines. In 1903, looking for a source of additional funding, the City of Montreal requested an accounting of all monies collected:

“Submitted and read letter... from Misers Gervais and Rainville advocates, on behalf of the Sheriff of Montreal requesting an account of all fines collected since 1867 through the Records Court or in any other way, also report from the Chief Constable... showing amount of such fines so collected.”

– Council Proceedings, July 1903

Over the next several years the municipality’s population increased placing additional requirements upon the police department. In 1907, a new position was created – **Sub-Chief** – and filled by **Thomas Moffit**. One year later, Council authorized the appointment of a **“Police Matron”** to perform such duties as may be specified by the Committee. Additional funding from this growth was collected from **cabmen’s license fees**.



Former fire station, Victoria Avenue – Image:
Michael Walsh

Council attention turned to the construction of a **second Police and Fire Station**; and, by 1909, selecting a location on Metcalfe Avenue. Council abandoned this option following residents' protests by having these services located on their residential street. As such, Council acquired a \$25,000 loan and relocated the proposed construction on city-owned property at **Victoria Avenue near The Boulevard**.

Very few images exist of the Westmount Police Force in uniform. In 1911, their winter uniform was comprised of Persian lamb caps, black leather mitts, badges for their caps, riding gauntlets and boots.

During that period, their duties also included the inspection of foods, drugs and agricultural fertilizers under the **Adulteration Act**. In addition, they were provided with rifles and trained in the use at the rifle range in the basement of Victoria Hall.

By 1915, municipal services had outgrown their current buildings. In fact, the **Health Inspector** was alarmed at the growing number of sick days taken by staff due to the damp and unhealthy conditions in the former schoolhouse. To this end, the City issued bonds totalling \$350,000 for purchasing a site and erection of a **City Hall**, department offices and a Fire Station and Police Station. These bonds were payable in forty-four years at an interest rate of 4.5%.

This period was during **the Great War** and serving police members were given life insurance policy through Aetna with premiums paid by the City. In addition, relatives they were supporting were awarded a monthly allowance. Records indicate that one police force member, **Donald Bernie**, was killed in active service with the **60th Battalion, C.E.F.** during December 1914.

As an enticement to retain qualified personnel, the City adopted **By-Law 313** in 1916, creating the **Police and Firemen's Pension Fund**. The employee contributes five percent of their salary and the City adds an additional

\$1,000 per year. One could draw their pension (one third of the average salary) at 50 years of age and having 25 years of service.



A similar model of the American La France Fire Engine Company was used by the fire department in the 1900s – Image: Public Domain



Former police and fire boxes. When they were operational these boxes were topped with green and ruby coloured glass globes – Image: Michael Walsh

By 1917, the Chief of Police, Thomas Moffitt, Inspector **William Wren**, Sergeants of Police, **Charles Vickers** and **William Gilhooly** were given powers to prosecute all offenders of the **Act Respecting Motor Vehicles** – later renamed the **Quebec Motor Vehicle Act**.

During November 1920, the police force came under criticism after two stray children were found – one of whom died under the steps of a house on St. Catherine Street. Apparently one child spoke to a policeman who offered no assistance. The police department denied the accusation and stated they knew nothing about the stray children. This explanation satisfied Council who did not pursue the matter any further.

The Chief of Police, Thomas Moffitt retired in 1922. Following his retirement, the Fire and Police separated into two departments headed by a **Chief of Police** (William Wren) and a **Chief of Fire** (Charles Vickers). That same year, City services moved from 21 and 23 Stanton Street to the new City Hall building. By 1923, the police department moved into the former City Hall on Stanton Street leaving their old quarters to the Fire Department.



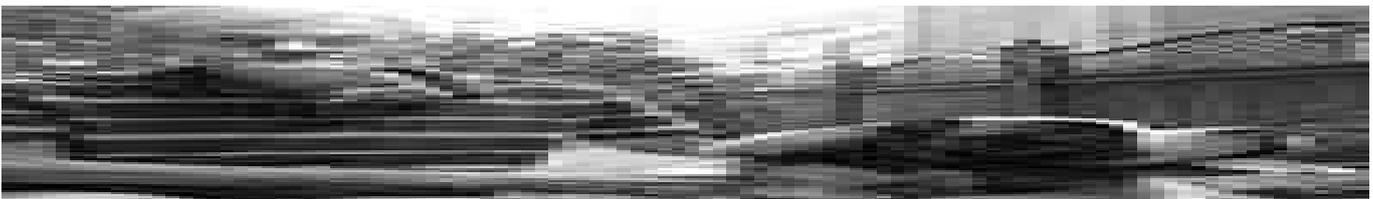
Chevrolet touring vehicle, the mode of police transportation used in the early 1920s – Image: [Lglswe](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training, and publishing, include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. During this period, he was also an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Prior to moving to Montreal, he was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education evaluating bilingual primary and secondary school programs. Today, he enjoys spending time with his (huge) Saint Bernard while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and

streets. He can be contacted at michaelld2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)



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