



TSA History of the Tennessee Sheriffs' Association Draft

October 8, 2025

On March 22, 1971, the Tennessee Sheriffs Association (TSA) was duly founded and chartered by the Tennessee Secretary of State, the Honorable Joe Carr. The first official office address for the Association was 1729 Glenn Echo Road, Nashville, Tennessee.

The incorporation followed the recommendations of the President Lyndon B. Johnson's President's Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals¹ to create greater representation of state and local law enforcement in policy development. Founding members of the TSA began deliberations to incorporate an association for sheriffs in Tennessee at the Tennessee Law Enforcement Training Academy (TLETA) with assistance from Mr. Charlie Grisby, Director of the Academy. These early discussions paralleled the development of a like association for police chiefs in Tennessee. One specific recommendation from the Johnson Commission included establishing minimum standards for law enforcement deputies and officers statewide.

In 1969 following a series of hearings with the General Assembly, law enforcement leaders encouraged members of the General Assembly to enact "minimum standards" for hiring all law enforcement officers in Tennessee, to include testing, background checks, and psychological testing. From 1969 until late 1970 a series of meetings and training programs took place at the TLETA in Donelson to advance

¹ The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, often referred to as the Johnson Commission, was established in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Its primary goal was to examine public safety and the role of the federal government in fighting crime. The commission, led by Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, was the first of its kind to comprehensively study the American criminal justice system.

these concepts of “minimum standards” for all law enforcement personnel in Tennessee.ⁱ

During the early discussions of minimum standards in the early 1970’s, Davidson County Sheriff John A. Frazier, elected in 1967 and Sheriff Lafayette (Fate) Thomas, elected in 1972 played important roles in the passage of the statutory provision enacted by the General Assembly. Blount County Sheriff Harold Brown who served from 1970 to 1976 actively participated in the discussions to create minimum standards for Tennessee law enforcement. Joining Sheriff Brown in 1970, was Knox County Sheriff Bernard L. Waggoner, who served from 1968 to 1974. Representing Hamilton County was Sheriff A.B. Shipley whose term spanned from 1968 to 1974. Completing the contingent representing Sheriffs was Shelby County Sheriff William "Bill" Morris, serving as sheriff from 1964 to 1970. Sheriff Roy C. Nixon succeeded Bill Morris as Shelby County Sheriff in 1970 and held the position until December 31, 1978.

The TSA was soon founded in 1971 by the charter members to create an organization to advance law enforcement training and development for the Sheriffs. Over the next decades additional standards and requirements for serving in law enforcement were developed and adopted, expanding the original standards adopted in 1971. Major revisions to the initial set of minimum standards for law enforcement occurred in 1983² and endorsed by the Tennessee Sheriffs Association.

In 1772, prior to Tennessee becoming the 16th state, the Office of Sheriff was first recognized and later adopted into the state’s Constitution in 1796. Since 1772 more than 4,155 men and 28 women have served as a county sheriff in Tennessee.³ The Office of Sheriff has been provided for in each of Tennessee's three constitutions (1796, 1835 and 1870) and was retained in the latest amendment in 1978. The sheriff is now elected to a four-year term in the August general election in the same year in which the governor is elected. Tenn. Const., art. VII, § 1; T.C.A. § 2-3-202. *Smith v. Plummer*, 834 S.W.2d 311, 313 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1992) (Sheriffs are constitutional officers.).

² The Tennessee General Assembly established minimum standards for hiring law enforcement officers through Public Chapter 455 of the 1981 Acts of Tennessee. These standards became effective on July 1, 1983.

³ "Stars Over Tennessee: Compilation of the History of the Sheriffs of Tennessee." is a 516 page history of Tennessee Sheriffs. Ronnie Erwin, presented to the TSA. In attendance for the presentation included Gov. Bill Lee, Lt. Gov. Randy McNally and Deputy Commissioner of Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security and former Wilson County Sheriff Terry Ashe.

It's worth noting the office of sheriff itself dates back much further, originating in medieval England in the 9th century, making it one of the oldest continuing, non-military law enforcement entities in history. The first sheriff in what is now Tennessee was Valentine Sevier from Watauga in 1778, according to the McMinn County Sheriff's Office and predates the formal establishment of Knox County in 1792 as a part of the state of Tennessee.

The history of sheriffs in Tennessee predates the statehood of Tennessee when Blount, Knox and Rutherford counties authorized the creation of an office of the Sheriff.

Davidson County records reflect the Sheriff's Office was established in 1783. It was created when Davidson County was established by the North Carolina legislature, the same year the Revolutionary War ended. The first sheriff, Daniel Williams, was elected in October of that year.⁴

Although Daniel Williams Jr., was the first sheriff of Davidson County, he was not the first sheriff of the "district." The colonist had established the Cumberland Court on January 7, 1783 as a regional government to oversee the new settlement. The Court elected John Montgomery district sheriff in January and swore him in on February 5, 1783, however he was soon replaced by Thomas Fletcher as "Sworn Sheriff of ye District of Cumberland."⁵

Era of Early Development

As referenced, the development of sheriff offices began before Tennessee's statehood, dating back to 1783 with the establishment of Davidson County. Soon after the establishment of Davidson County, other counties followed by creating an office of the sheriff.

⁴ According to Col. T.H. Williams, writing to Lyman Draper about 1843, four Williams brothers served as Davidson County Sheriffs, including Daniel, Sampson, Oliver, and Wright.

⁵ "Minutes of Cumberland Court," March 15, 1783, p 29.

The Knox County Sheriff's Office can trace its origins back to the establishment of Knox County in 1792, with the appointment of its first sheriff, Robert Houston, in June of that year.

The Blount County Sheriff's Office was organized in 1795, a year before Tennessee became a state. Blount County was established by an act of the Territorial Assembly, passed July 11, 1795. The swearing-in of the first sheriff, Littlepage Sims was one of the first actions taken after the county's establishment. In 1796, Joseph Colvill took over the Sheriff's post and served until 1800.

In 1778, Valentine Sevier was named the first sheriff in Washington County, the oldest county in Tennessee. He would later serve as the Justice of the Court for Washington County.

The first Sheriff of Robertson County was Hugh Henry. He was elected Sheriff in 1796 at the first court meeting when Robertson County was created and when Tennessee became a State. Thomas Buckingham is considered the first Sheriff of Sevier County, serving from 1794 to 1802. He was also one of the five commissioners responsible for selecting the location of the Sevier County courthouse and served as a delegate to the state's first Constitutional Convention in 1796.

Davidson County is the oldest county in Middle Tennessee and was established by an act of the North Carolina legislature in April 1783. At the first session of the Davidson County Court, on October 6, 1783, the justices elected Daniel Williams to a two year term as sheriff, ordering him to construct the first courthouse and county jail.

The first Sheriff in McMinn Co was Spencer Beavers, who served 22 years from 1820 to 1842 and is the longest serving McMinn County Sheriff. The second longest serving Sheriff was Steve Frisbie, 16 years, 1994 to 2010. Former McMinn County Sheriff Larry Wallace is the only TSA member ever to serve as Colonel of the Tennessee Highway Patrol and the Director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

Early sheriffs in Tennessee played a critical role in maintaining order in the developing frontier settlements. Their duties involved not only upholding the law but also responding to the unique challenges of a developing territory. From the beginning, sheriffs were entrusted with a wide range of responsibilities by colonial

and state legislatures. These duties included law enforcement, maintaining the peace, serving civil processes, managing jails and workhouses, and in some periods, collecting taxes. As early as 1831, sheriffs had the authority to appoint deputies. For example, the Cocke County Sheriff was authorized to appoint three deputies in 1831. This practice continued, with some counties receiving authorization for additional deputies as needed.

Historically and prior to 1978, Tennessee Sheriffs were limited to a maximum of three, two-year terms. A 1970 constitutional amendment proposal to extend the term to four years was approved by voters, but failed due to not receiving a majority vote in the gubernatorial election.⁶ However, state law changed in 1980⁷, allowing sheriffs to be elected to unlimited four-year terms.

The Tennessee Constitution does not prescribe the duties of the office of Sheriff even though Sheriffs are constitutional officers. The office of Sheriff carries all the common-law powers and duties except as modified by state statute.⁸ As referenced previously, the sheriff's duties were originally defined by the common law but are now largely prescribed by statute.⁹ Over time, the sheriff's responsibilities have expanded from being primarily ministerial to include peacekeeping functions. Today, the sheriff's statutory duties encompass common law duties and can be grouped into four broad categories: (1) keeping the peace, (2) attending the courts, (3) serving the process and orders of the courts, and (4) operating the jail.¹⁰ In counties with a metropolitan form of government, some of these functions may be assigned by the charter to other officials.

⁶ The Tennessee Sheriffs' Term Limits, Amendment 1, also known as Amendment 1, was on the ballot in Tennessee on November 3, 1970, as a legislatively referred constitutional amendment. It was approved. The amendment proposed that the constitution be amended regarding the sheriffs' term limits. The amendment proposed that a sheriff would be elected for a period of four years, rather than two. This referendum was eventually defeated because it did not receive majority votes in the gubernatorial election.

⁷ Public Acts of 1978, Chapter 934, extended the term of office for the sheriff from two years to four years and removed the limitation of three on the number of terms the sheriff could serve. Effective September 1, 1978, county rangers were abolished.

⁸ *State ex rel. Thompson v. Reichman*, 188 S.W. 225, 227, *reh'g denied*, 188 S.W. 597 (Tenn. 1916).

⁹ *George v. Harlan*, 1998 WL 668637, *3 (Tenn. 1998) *citing Metropolitan Gov't of Nashville & Davidson County v. Poe*, 383 S.W.2d 265, 273 (1964).

¹⁰ *See George v. Harlan*, 1998 WL 668637, *3 (Tenn. 1998).

Long Term Service

Many of Tennessee's sheriffs have served extraordinary lengths of public service to their respective communities. In most cases, these sheriffs have gone on to be a legacy leader in their respective counties, the state of Tennessee and nationally as well. To highlight some of the longest serving sheriffs, consider the following:

Cumberland County Sheriff N. H. McGeachy held office from 1910 to 1950, making him the longest-serving Sheriff in the county's history. He was known for his commanding presence and policy of kindness towards prisoners.

The longest-serving sheriff in Tennessee history (as of 2025) is Weakley County Sheriff Mike Wilson. He served for 46 years in law enforcement, including 10 terms as sheriff after first being elected in 1982.

From 1974 to 1998, Neal Klyce honorably served as Sheriff of Crockett County. In 1998, his son and only child, Troy N. Klyce, was elected to continue his father's legacy of leadership and remains in office today as the longest-serving Sheriff in Crockett County history.

Davidson County Sheriff Daron Hall was sworn-in as the 61st sheriff of Davidson County, September 2002 and elected to his fifth term in 2018. Upon conclusion of his fifth term, he will be the longest serving sheriff in Metropolitan Nashville's history

Blount County Sheriff James "Jimbo" Berrong has been serving as sheriff since 1989, making him the longest serving sheriff in the county's history.

Sevier County Sheriff Carmon Townsend served 18 years as sheriff, from 1972 to 1990, making him the longest-serving Sheriff in the county's history.

Franklin County Sheriff Tim Fuller, elected Sheriff in 2006 is now the longest serving Sheriff in Franklin County, surpassing Sheriff Teddy McCallie who served Franklin County from 1986 to 1998. Sheriff Fuller serves on the both the board of the TSA and the National Sheriffs Association.

Ultimate Sacrifices

Regrettably, serving as a sheriff can have dangers related to service such as Grainger County Sheriff Samuel Preston Greenlee who was tragically killed in the line of duty in 1889 while attempting to apprehend a prison escapee. He was a Union Civil War Veteran.

Campbell County Sheriff Sampson D. Queener and Deputy Travis Gibson were stabbed to death Tuesday, August 3, 1858, while attempting to arrest two men accused of passing counterfeit bills. As Sheriff Queener told one of the men he was under arrest, the other man turned and shot the Sheriff. Despite being wounded, Sheriff Queener jumped off his horse and knocked the man to the ground. Deputy Gibson attempted to subdue the other man but was stabbed in the neck. As Sheriff Queener attempted to come to the aid of Deputy Gibson, however he was also fatally stabbed.

Campbell County would lose yet another Sheriff 35 years later when on Saturday, March 18, 1893 Sheriff John Burnett was murdered. Sheriff John Burnett was considered the most aggressive and diligent in the enforcement of law of all the sheriffs the county ever had. While transporting two prisoners by train to the Knox County jail, Sheriff Burnett was murdered by two men while executing an escape from custody.

Yet another tragic death occurred approximately 53 years later when Unicoi County Sheriffs Blake Washington Head was murdered Wednesday, March 18, 1942. Sheriff Head was shot and killed after responding to a domestic disturbance call around 6:45 pm on that cold March evening. Sheriff Head and two deputies responded to a residence to answer a call of a man threatening to kill his family. As Sheriff Head stepped out of his vehicle he was shot and killed by rifle fire. The two deputies returned fire, killing the suspect.

Hamilton County Sheriff William T. Cate and Deputy John Conway were shot and killed Thursday, September 14, 1882 while transporting 3 convicted prisoners. While transporting the 3 prisoners by train to Knoxville, the train made a stop in Sweetwater where 3 other men entered the train car approaching Deputy Conway from behind shooting and killing the deputy. Sheriff Cate attempted to rush the men when he was shot multiple times dying on the train car. The killers were captured and executed in 1883.

On Tuesday, September 15, 1914 Humphreys County Sheriff Edward Stockard was shot and killed while trying to arrest a man for drunken behavior along the Duck River. The man, shot Sheriff Stockard six times.

Sheriff Israel L. Smith of Bradley County, was shot and killed Tuesday, March 14, 1922 while he and several deputies attempted to apprehend bootleggers near Cleveland.

Sheriff Thomas James Swafford of Bledsoe County was shot and killed from ambush while sitting in a vehicle in front of a store he owned in Pikeville. The Sheriff was talking with two deputies when two unidentified men opened fire on him from across the street. One of the bullets struck him in the spine and he was taken to the local hospital where he died the next day.

On July 20th, 1931, Sheriff Mart Murphy of Robertson County and serving his fifth year as Sheriff was shot and killed by a suspect he was attempting to arrest for domestic violence and bootlegging in the Springfield community. When Sheriff Murphy and a constable knocked on the door, the suspect opened the door and shot the Sheriff multiple times. Sheriff Murphy would succumb to his wounds two days later. The suspect was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to death, however the reduced to life. Regrettably the convicted murder was paroled May 15, 1950.

Sheriff Cleve Daugherty was shot and killed, Wednesday, July 19, 1933 as he and two deputies raided an illegal still in the Piney Valley area of Anderson County. After identifying themselves, one of the subjects opened fire with a shotgun, killing Sheriff Daugherty.

Dekalb County Sheriff W.H. Bing, Jr. died Wednesday, June 8, 1966 near the Beech Grove community while transporting a mental health patient to Central State Hospital in Nashville. The patient suddenly reached over Sheriff Bing's shoulder grabbing the steering wheel causing the vehicle to flip over, ejecting a civilian worker and a deputy, however the patient and Sheriff Bing died from injuries suffered from the crash.

Today

The TSA is comprised of the leading law enforcement authority in the state of Tennessee, as each sheriff is elected by the citizens of their respective counties. These faithful public servants provide sound public safety policy recommendations to various government legislative bodies such as the Tennessee General Assembly and local county legislative bodies.

The Sheriff “is the commander in chief of the law enforcement of the county.” All judicial and ministerial officers of justice and all city officials within the county are required to aid the Sheriff, and the population of the Sheriff’s county is subject to his command ‘in the prevention and suppression,’ not only of violent breaches of the peace, but of all public offenses.”¹¹ “The duties and powers of a sheriff within the limits of an incorporated city are precisely the same of as the unincorporated areas in the remainder of the county” as the statutory provisions draws no distinction.”¹² By statute the Sheriff is the conservator of the peace, and it is the sheriff’s duty to suppress all affrays, riots, routs, unlawful assemblies, insurrections, or other breaches of the peace. In addition, it is the duty of the Sheriff to ferret out, detect, and prevent crime, to secure evidence of crimes; and to apprehend and arrest criminals. The Sheriff is also charged with patrolling the roads of the county and must furnish the necessary deputies to carry out these duties. T.C.A. §§ 8-8-213, 38-3-102, and 38-3-108.

TSA is the leader of professional development statewide and has played a critical role in the formal development of the function and authority for Sheriffs throughout Tennessee. Vital to the development of critical infrastructure of Office of the Sheriff, TSA initiated a number of statutory acts to create a sustained effort to build professionalism, including in July 2001 the enactment of amendments to T.C.A. § 8-24-103(a)(1) and T.C.A. § 8-20-120, requiring budgetary support from local county legislative bodies of the Sheriff’s offices. This critical legislation led to minimum standards for compensation for Sheriffs and deputies; and, mandating funding for public safety through the respective Sheriff offices. Progress has continued as the TSA pursues strategic goals to improve training, qualifications and revenue streams.

¹¹ *State ex rel. Thompson v. Reichman*, 188 S.W. 225, 227-228 (Tenn. 1916); T.C.A. § 38-3-102.

¹² *Reichman* at 228. Op. Tenn. Att’y Gen. 08-134 (August 14, 2008).

In 2006 the General Assembly at the urging of the TSA created a statutory requirement for every newly elected sheriff to attend a mandatory “new sheriffs’ school” to be held at TLETA. Further, requires such training take place prior to the first day of September and prior to the newly elected Sheriff taking office. The TSA continued to promote training for Sheriffs as each elected or appointed Sheriff must complete a 40 hour program of in-service training annually. Sheriffs today continue to promote high standards of performance and accountability to maintain the public safety in their communities. Today’s Sheriffs are charged with more statutory duties and responsibilities than any other elected or appointed official in the state. Additionally, the office of Sheriff is the only elected position that requires that a candidate be psychologically tested to determine fitness to serve in the office.

Training and development of Tennessee’s sheriffs is a top priority of the TSA to insure the administration of justice is achieved. In 2002, the TSA was one of the first state sheriffs association to partner with the respective state mental health agency to create standards for the humane transportation of persons with mental health disabilities. The pilot effort by TSA grew significantly over the years and impacting dozens of Sheriffs’ office statewide.

Other innovations have been advocated for by the TSA, including a unique program, “Evidence Based Jail” training and standards. TSA partnered with the Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs in 2022 to implement best practices for jail operations by Sheriffs. This initiative continues to be successful statewide.

All 95 counties of Tennessee are represented in the TSA, with each member having a voice to advance standards, tackle difficult challenges and serve as leaders in law enforcement.

The TSA is vital resource to Tennessee sheriffs as they navigate the complexities of ever changing public safety issues, jail management and developing training for law enforcement professionals. Together the sheriffs of Tennessee continue to be innovative and bringing the best law enforcement services to their communities.

¹³ Although Tennessee took a significant step towards standardized law enforcement training by authorizing the Tennessee Law Enforcement Training Academy in 1963, the initial enactment of *minimum standards* for police officers is primarily linked to the establishment of the Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.) Commission under T.C.A. §§ 38-8-101–106
