

Municipal law enforcement began with incorporation in 1828 and a town marshal; jail was a converted ship's brig at harbor's edge; population totaled 421. In 1900, the Key West Police force numbered some 13 officers.

The first 50 years of civilization in Key West saw only three persons convicted of capital felonies, one of which occurred in the city, and the others on the high seas, two were capitally punished, and the sentence of the other commuted to imprisonment for life.

On March 10, 1904, Key West recorded its first officer killed in the line of duty. Policeman Clarence Till responded to a fight involving half a dozen or so men. They resisted arrest, overpowered Till and took his gun. He withdrew, borrowed two pistols, returned, was shot several times, and died 10 minutes later.

The suspect was apprehended, convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to hang. Seven months later, the Florida Supreme Court not only overturned the case and returned it for retrial, it ruled he could only be tried for manslaughter. The suspect was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail. He was let out on work release to the fire station, but he was soon arrested for robbery and arson. Convicted and sentenced to 13 years, he escaped and went into hiding, only to be murdered himself in 1910.

In the 1970s, tourism began to grow in Key West, and local law enforcement needed to begin addressing the influx of visitors as well as serving as a small-town police force.

On December 18, 1975, the Key West Police Department recorded its second officer killed in the line of duty. Norman Alvin Drew had been on the job just three months when his police motorcycle crashed and he was fatally injured.

In 1980, world attention focused on the exodus from Mariel, Cuba. Key West became a crossroads, a jumping-off point for rescuers, and an entry point for many -- if not most -- of the refugees. The Key West Police were suddenly faced with maintaining order in the midst of an influx of people and traffic. Federal agencies were officially responsible for the processing of refugees, and the handling and storage of boats.

The 1980s were perhaps the darkest years in the history of the police. Drug smuggling was affecting all of South Florida, and Key West was not immune. In 1985, members of the police and fire department were indicted on federal drug charges.

But the infamy moved the department into a new era of professionalism, and the department worked to rebuild credibility with other agencies and the public.

By the early 1990s, the concept of community policing was taking hold in the department. By building direct relationships between law enforcement and the community, the level of trust improves and the crime rate drops.

Officers became more involved, reaching out with programs like Eye on the Island, checking on closed businesses at night, and the growing Police Athletic League, in which officer mentors kids in sports and after school programs.

On January 23, 2006, the Key West Police Department lost its third member in the line of duty. Detective John Piskator was in a training session with the Special Response Team when he succumbed to a heart attack.

Over the past several years, Key West has emerged into a progressive and prosperous tourist community. People from all over the world come to enjoy the warm tropical climate and laid back way of life. The estimated 3 million tourist visitors a year add a special challenge to this small town police force. But community policing has proved successful, and crime has dropped steadily over the past decade.

The Key West Police Department continually strives to make Key West a beautiful and safe city to live and visit. Our members endeavor to provide friendly and quality services to Key West's citizens and visitors.