



NEWS RELEASE

INDIANA LAW ENFORCEMENT MEMORIAL

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Remembering Constable Robert Murphy 200th Anniversary of Indiana's First Law Enforcement Line of Duty Death

Franklin County | Constable Robert Murphy is being remembered today on the 200th anniversary of the ultimate sacrifice he made when he was stabbed while serving a writ of ca. sa. on November 3, 1824. His death eight days later, on November 11, occurred exactly seven years and 11 months after Indiana was admitted to the Union.

Constable Murphy is the first known line of duty death of a law enforcement officer in the state of Indiana and the 26th in the history of the United States. Of Indiana's 527 fallen officers, he is one of only eight who were killed by stabbing. Harrison County Sheriff William Gresham, stabbed on January 23, 1834, was previously believed to be our first line of duty death.

The writ had been placed in the hands of the newly-appointed township constable after Elizabeth Rariden had filed an affidavit charging assault against her elderly neighbor, Samuel Fields who was living on the farm of his son-in-law in Union County. Upon an initial attempt to serve the writ at the log cabin, Fields refused to accompany Constable Murphy, stating he would appear the next morning.

His father, Squire Samuel Murphy, admonished his son not to be deterred in carrying out his first official act. Returning to the cabin a second time, he was met on the doorstep by Fields who had pulled a large butcher knife worth 25 cents which he had hidden in the log wall. Fields thrust the knife into the left side of Constable Murphy, who languished for eight days before dying from his wound.

Robert Murphy, 24, who was single and the first-born child of Samuel and Elizabeth (née Hitchner), was born on May 29, 1800 in Salem County, New Jersey. The family moved to Franklin County around 1818 where his father served as a squire on the board of county justices from 1824 to 1827.

In addition to his parents, he was survived by five brothers, Jacob, Recompense, James, Samuel and William; three sisters, Phebe Elwell, Sarah Hamilton and Mary Craft; paternal grandparents, William and Phebe (née Sherry) Murphy; and preceded in death by two infant sisters, Elizabeth and Catherine. He was buried in Bath Springs Cemetery near Liberty.

A grand jury found a bill of indictment for first-degree murder against Fields. On March 24, 1825, after a jury rendered a verdict of guilty, he was sentenced to death by hanging on May 27 by Franklin Circuit Judge Miles C. Eggleston. Citizens seeking executive clemency filed 13 petitions bearing 730 signatures, citing Fields' advanced age of 84 and his honorable service as an officer in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War at the Battles of Trenton and Brandywine.

On execution day, Franklin County Sheriff Robert John along with 25 deputies armed with flintlock muskets, escorted Fields from the log jail on Main Street in Brookville, the county seat. A gallows had been erected from a large sycamore tree on the Whitewater River bank where a grave had been dug nearby. Sheriff John placed the noose around the neck of the condemned and as the prescribed time quickly approached, the attention of the crowd was drawn to a man riding down the hill on horseback.

It was Governor James Brown Ray, a native of Brookville, who had ridden all the way from Indianapolis dressed in the uniform of a general of the Indiana Militia. Making his way through the large crowd that assembled, he ascended the scaffold toward Fields holding out a roll of paper and in granting a pardon said, "Here, I give you your life." Fields was taken away by friends, first to near Hamilton, Ohio, for a short time before moving to Crawfordsville, where he died a few years later.

Although some accounts reported Fields was 75 years old, state executive proceedings listed his age at 85 while other accounts indicated he was born circa 1740, however, his burial place has never been confirmed. With the assistance of the Franklin County Public Library, the incident took place on a 160-acre parcel of land confirmed by a deed issued to John Thompson, the son-in-law of Fields. The farm was located on the north side of what is now Snowden Road (County Road 750 South), three-quarters of a mile east of Liberty Pike (County Road 100 East) in adjacent Union County.

Despite being discovered in July 2010, Constable Murphy has not been submitted for consideration as an eligible line of duty death to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund by the Franklin County Sheriff's Department but is honored on the Indiana Law Enforcement and Fire Fighters Memorial in Indianapolis on Panel L26 at Line 12.

Soon after the discovery of Constable Murphy, contact was made with a 4th great-nephew descended from his brother Recompence who had only ever heard anecdotal stories of a distant relative having been killed while serving as a deputy sheriff. His own genealogical research had previously located a 3rd great-nephew as well as a first-cousin, four times removed of Constable Murphy.

Constable Murphy marked the 49th historical line of duty death successfully researched by Co-Founder Jeffrey Williams since 2003. Through his efforts, he has been responsible for bringing the long-awaited recognition to 84 such officers, including five of the first nine fallen officers in the Hoosier State. Acknowledgement is given to Philip Wietholter, former Brookville chief of police and retired Indiana state trooper, for providing the lead in this case.

*"My days on earth were few, the longer is my rest. The Saviour call'd me soon, because he thought it best."
— Constable Murphy's epitaph*

View our memorial for Constable Murphy at: www.officersearch.inlem.org/officer.php?id=0136

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About the Indiana Law Enforcement Memorial

Founded in 2017, the Indiana Law Enforcement Memorial is a nonprofit organization dedicated to honoring all of our state's fallen officers. Its mission is to honor law enforcement officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice; provide support to their surviving family members and affected agencies; and conduct research into and foster public awareness of Indiana line of duty deaths. Each of these over 500 officers are memorialized through a website maintained as an exclusive resource to our state with the most comprehensive details to preserve the history surrounding their incidents and an extensive compilation of statistical data.