

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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America's First Policewoman

■ LAPD's Alice Stebbins Wells is generally considered the country's first policewoman.

Alice Stebbins Wells photo courtesy the Los Angeles Women Police Officers and Associates. Charles Sebastian photos courtesy Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Christine Rice, Director.



Alice Stebbins Wells.

For years I had heard of Alice Stebbins Wells as the first policewoman in Los Angeles, and recently discovered that she is also considered the first female police officer in the world. I felt the time had come to introduce her to our readership. I want to thank LAPD Sgt. II (Retired) Glynn B. Martin, Executive Director of the Los Angeles Police Historical Society, for being so helpful in my research for this article.

Alice Stebbins was born in Manhattan, Kan. June 13, 1873, and educated there as well. Upon leaving school, she settled for a business career in the Midwest, New York and New England. She carried with her a reputation of a keen intellect, a staunch sense of justice, a belief that there was a vital spark in all human beings, and a serious desire to be of real service to mankind.

About 1910, Alice became a pastor's assistant and began giving lectures about the message of the prophets and their influence on the first decade of the 20th century. In this position she did more traveling, where she met her future husband, Frank Wells. Mr. Wells was not in good health, and this forced Alice to return to professional work. At this time they moved permanently to Los Angeles.

In the spring of 1910, Alice Stebbins Wells, a five-foot-two inch, 115-pound female, made an appeal to 35 men and women, stating, "I don't want to make arrests. I want to keep people from needing to be arrested, especially young people." The men and women present were important movers and shakers in the City of Los Angeles at that time. The occasion was for an impending petition to present to the Police Commission and the City Council. It revolved around bringing women into the police force through the action of an ordinance.

The intention of this ordinance was to create a position for a woman police officer who would be under civil service with the same standing as her male counterpart. The purpose, however, would not be to duplicate their brother officer's work, but to supplement the work pertaining to women and children.

The 35 individuals, with many comments, signed the petition to move forward. An influential woman in the community, Hester Griffith Miller, president of the Southern California WCTU and confidant of Mayor George Alexander, accompanied Alice Stebbins Wells to present the petition to him, as president of the Police Commission. He, too, had many queries. But after three months of vigilant work between the Police Commissioners and City Council, the ordinance passed Aug. 12 and became effective Sept. 12, 1910.

Alice was then sworn in by City Clerk Charles L. Wilde at the City Hall on Fort Street (now Broadway) between Second and Third Streets. She was then sent to the police headquarters on West First Street to receive her badge from Chief Alexander Galloway. The chief introduced her to patrolman Leo W. Marden. For the prior two years he had been in charge of all children's cases in Juvenile Court. Marden was given orders to take Alice and introduce her to the system.

The usual Gamewell patrol box key, book of rules and first-aid book were given to the "first female officer" as had been given to the men of the Department. Officer Wells was then given her badge, like her predecessors. A new die had to be cast that would read "policewoman badge number one" for Officer Alice Stebbins Wells.

By now, the newspapers and Pathé News films were having a field day with this new police concept. At that time, the population of the City was 320,000, with less than 300 members in the Police Department.

Office space for Officer Wells could be found only in one of the two jury rooms on the third floor of the Department building. The shelves were filled with old court cases, and behind them were rats running in every direction. Once the varmints discovered the officer was a permanent occupant, they eventually left by jumping out of open windows, legend has it.

The next problem Alice encountered was how to give policemen one day off per month. Prior to that, the employees worked every day, with the exception of a 15-day vacation every year. This worked well for the men by overlapping beats, but there were three women, three matrons in the jail, who were in charge of women prisoners. Capt. Paul Maupt, in charge of Central Station, called Officer Wells to his office to see if one Sunday a month she would be willing to relieve the duty of a different matron. Alice agreed until additional policewomen were appointed.



Charles Sebastian, police administrator at the time of Alice Stebbins Wells' appointment.

In 1915, the matrons were given new status. Officer Wells knew that men jailers were regular policemen. She felt this was not equality. She went to the chief, Charles E. Sebastian, and suggested the change to make matrons into policewomen, with all the rights of the policemen. Eventually it became an ordinance in 1915. The position of matron, the matrons' civil service examinations and

matrons' badges were abolished. The three women in service became policewomen by ordinance. By the time Officer Wells retired, there were ten policewomen in charge of the women prisoners in the City jail.

As stated above, publicity over this enormous change in the LAPD was heard and felt all over the world. Many departments across the country invited Officer Wells to come and speak on behalf of her new position, but above all to give credence to the fact that children everywhere deserved equal rights and increased protection police departments could furnish. Alice Stebbins Wells felt it her duty to travel and speak to protect children, women prisoners and cry out for crime prevention in general with assistance coming from the new position of policewomen.

By 1911, Officer Alice Stebbins Wells' incredible message was being seen and heard in newsreels and magazines around the world. She had been invited to visit cities and communities to deliver her message about her work in the City of Los Angeles. Her first major invitation was from the Los Angeles District, California Federation of Women's Clubs, at the biennial session in San Francisco in 1911. Her message was accepted sympathetically and carried back to numerous home clubs, with great results.

By this wide contact, Alice claimed she visited at least half of the United States and eastern Canada. She received correspondence from as far away as New Zealand and South Africa. Curiosity followed her when she traveled the States. In Philadelphia the photographers met her at the train; in a coal mining community, the proprietor of a small picture show wanted her to speak from his platform. In New Orleans a man from the City Clerk's

office, who was six-feet two with proportionate weight, begged her to arrest him. She had to inform him that she was far from her jurisdiction. But he continued, pleading that "he wanted to be arrested by a lady," according to records.

Her speeches were so invigorating that leaders in all visited cities took her words and sponsored her lectures. In Washington, D.C., during the William Howard Taft administration, the police commissioner introduced her to the Senate. In Baltimore, the former secretary of the Navy presided and introduced Alice. While traveling, audiences were large, often crowding auditoriums. Much space and support were given to her and her platform by local newspapers.

Amazingly, the City of Los Angeles did *not* pay for anything for Alice's trips and other expenditures while promoting Los Angeles' new policewomen activities. Officer Wells "forfeited [her] salary with accompanying pension rights through leaves of absence for a total of two years...Her salary was then used for emergency policewomen from the waiting list." One interesting note is that the mayor of Troy, NY, was so impressed with Officer Wells and the favored publicity she gave Los Angeles, that he said he wished his city could have a policewoman tomorrow.

By 1916, policewomen had been appointed in about 20 states and other countries. Those listed were New York, Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, London, Toronto, Melbourne and Shanghai, and many other places continued this procedure over the years. Prior to that year, Alice Stebbins Wells organized the International Association of Policewomen, where she was president for five years. She found it interesting that women police officers in other large communities had moved up the corporate ladder, but not in the LAPD. In 1917, Alice was able to convince UCLA to conduct police training classes for women during the summer sessions. This opportunity was therefore the first university to have a policewoman on its faculty.

In 1934, Officer Alice Stebbins Wells became a sergeant. She retired in 1940 but continued as an official speaker for LAPD. She passed away Aug. 16, 1957, at 84.

I should note that there is some small dispute about whether or not she in fact was first. An article by researcher Larry Harnisch in the Los Angeles Times, dated Aug. 19, 2007, documents evidence that perhaps she was not first in the country. While the evidence against her claim is not conclusive, it is worth mentioning.

Before closing, I would like to note an interesting little item I heard, but could not find a reference for. I was told that when Alice Stebbins Wells joined the City of Los Angeles Police Department, she had to make her own uniform!

The second policewoman in the LAPD was appointed in 1912. Her name was Rachel Shatto, at that time. And the story continues.



Then-Mayor George Alexander (left) and Police Chief Charles Sebastian at the time of Policewoman Alice Stebbins Wells' tenure with the LAPD.